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ACT LOCALLY; THINK GLOBALLY

Some comments on
pro-social behaviour, information processing
and development education

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ABSTRACT

Many children who live in information-rich and eventful situations seem to know and to care relatively little about what is going on around them.

Stimulation of "pro-social" behaviour and getting children involved in actual caring activities in their own environment may enhance children's interest in others and make them more open for relevant information and thus form essential components of development education practice.

Pro-social behaviour is vital in the acquisition of a global outlook. Understanding of the education processes that lead to the growth of pro-social behaviour is crucial for a correct development education approach.

The traditional approach to counter the children's perceived ignorance is to increase the level of information presented to them. Findings suggest that this is often not effective and may even be counter-productive. Children become, however, active information seekers and selectors when they can relate information to personally experienced events.

It is the task of development educators to get their pupils caringly involved in "human" or "development" issues (the elderly, minorities, pollution) in their own environment and to show how these issues relate to conditions in other countries, especially to those affecting under-served children.

Children enjoying this sort of education will probably evince a positive interest and also a deeper understanding of what affects their own lives and those of others.

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Need for a development education profile

Crucial to the discussion on development education is the perception of the ideal type of person development educators would like to see inhabit the world. In spite of the fact that the concept of development education itself still causes a good deal of confusion, most development educators seem to agree on the ultimate objective of development education: to help bring about critically aware persons who have the motivation and the skills to participate in development efforts; or in other words, development education aims at guiding people to become effective workers for a more livable and equitable world.

This vague description leaves many questions open, and this will be even more the case when one tries to define the behavioural objectives for the 9-13 year olds, the traditional target group of UNICEF's development education activities, who form also for psychological reasons an important age group, as they are in a critical period for the formation of attitudes towards other people and other values.

The central question here is: what sort of youngsters do we expect to see emerge after they have experienced development education. It will be quite difficult to write up the desired profile of these children, and yet such an exercise is essential to the dialogue on objectives and methodology of development education. I won't venture to spell out the complete personality of the ideal development educated 9-13 year old. I will only elaborate on a few features. My hunch is, however, that the more we study the objectives of development education, the more we will find them to resemble those of what we may loosely call "good, regular education". At least this ought to be so, and if it is not yet the case, it will probably happen in the immediate future. New to this good, regular education is perhaps the renewed plea to educate children on how to care and to make them aware of their global interdependence.

The behavioural traits I would like to talk about are: the presence of pro-social behaviour; the capability to search, select and process certain kinds of information; and the ability to work in practical situations. I consider these traits essential and would like to discuss with you why I see them as so important and what sort of methodological consequences we have to be aware of.

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Pro-social behaviour

Pro-social behaviour or social behaviour relates to attitudes such as interest in others, helping and caring behaviour, empathy, altruism, concern for others, and perspective-taking and the like. It contrasts with anti-social behaviour, or outright enmity. It is instructive to compare the educational backgrounds of children who can be classified as pro-social with those who can be named anti-social.

To summarize the most striking differences:

* Pro-social children have a positive self-image. They are fairly secure and content with themselves. This is most likely a result of:
* Experiencing the locus of control of their own life to rest mainly within themselves. They feel that they have a good deal to say about what is happening to them. Anti-social children are not happy with themselves. They also feel that forces outside themselves determine most of what affects their lives.
* Pro-social children see themselves as active agents only when they have been given the chance to try out and act out themselves in practical situations and when they have been allowed to experiment with different behavioural roles.
* Pro-social children have enjoyed significantly more inter-action with adults than their anti-social counterparts. They have worked, played or otherwise been engaged with adults for considerable parts of their lives.
* Anti-social children interact more exclusively with their peers.
* Pro-social children have been exposed to others - models - who actually showed pro-social behaviour. Thus they know from first-hand experience what being pro-social entails. These models may have been somebody who volunteered in a home for the elderly or an elderly person who assists in the church.
* Most conducive, however, to the growth of pro-social behaviour is a co-operative climate as opposed to a competitive setting. Anti-social children have learned to reach their goals through competition; pro-social children have learned to progress through co-operation.

I hope that you will agree with me that these observations, if correct, are of immediate consequence for development education, particularly if one realises that many of the educational surroundings of youngsters almost press them to become more anti-social. Adult-child interaction is rapidly disappearing, children are increasingly educated by their peers of thinner and thinner age-slices. Younger children playing with older children is a rare sight, so too the teen-ager who spends an important part of his time with adults.

Children seem to play less or to be less actively involved in their environment anyhow. No wonder, if one realises that in some countries children watch television over 36 hours a week. Instead of acting and trying out and learning to experience how their behaviour impacts their own lives, they tend to sit and remain passive. On top of that, schools, even life outside of schools, has become more competitive. We know that the rise in the suicide rate of elementary school children in some nations has gone up because the victims could not cope with the competitive atmosphere.

If we take development education seriously, I feel that it is high time that we address ourselves to this matter and do our utmost to reverse this trend.

Abundance of information and ignorance

Children in so-called developed nations are usually not only surrounded by material wealth, but also by an awesome wealth of information. They have easy access to all kinds of books, films, newspapers, television and other sources of knowledge. In fact, they almost seem to be bombarded by information. And yet, they know so little of what is going on around them. We all know, for example, of the Gallup polls taken among senior high school students in the United States. Not so long ago one of the polls revealed that 40% of the students thought Israel was an Arab nation and only a few students less named Golda Meir as the president of Egypt. Let me remind you: we speak here about high school students in a country where the Israel-Arab situation is given full attention all the time.

This paradoxical situation - ignorance amongst an abundance of information - has direct consequences for development education methodology. For the same reason we may wonder why, in spite of the heavy stream of information on the conditions of underserved people, especially of disadvantaged children in developing nations, many children seem to know or to care very little.

The traditional approach, to counter this lack of knowledge and perceived empathy by expanding the supply of information, is clearly not the answer. It may even aggravate the situation, as we have to jeopardize the quality and the content of what we would like to get through to the youngsters. We have fairly sturdy indications, for example, that the cognitive styles of children have changed dramatically compared to those of children of fifteen to twenty years ago. Children of today have a significantly shorter attention span, are less active, have a greater need for instant gratification and have a stronger craving for entertainment. If information has to be picked up by them, it has to be short, gripping, dramatic, entertaining, fast and varied. The TV commercial is a good example of the sort of format children like to see. It is obvious that development educators have to tread very gingerly here. Descriptions of maldevelopment or development issues are hard to put in the format of a TV advertisement. Too quick a style and format jeopardize the content of the message and thus make it uneducational.

Active seekers of information

I would like to discuss a way out of this predicament. Although the provision of information remains an important task of development educators and certainly constitutes the main reason for UNICEF's involvement in development education, I would rather see how we can make children active seekers of information. Or put differently, what must development educators do to make the children go out to the library, read the newspapers or write to organizations such as UNICEF to get new information?

Working with children increasingly suggests that this sort of thing will indeed happen when they are actually involved in purposeful and practical activities that have a bearing on development issues. Children who are thus engaged will be able to filter out relevant information from the shower of data reaching them, process and work with it and search for additional sources. The task for the development educator is to get them involved in these sorts of activities.

Children in development action

It is not an easy task to get children involved in development action. (It is not easy to define development action anyway.) It is not that children of this age group cannot be motivated, but rather that real options are limited. It is relatively easy for adults. They have a whole range of things they can do: they can vote, strike, do research, write, raise funds, make decisions, travel independently, form groups, and so on. The possibilities for children are indeed few, yet their psychological set-up asks for action and immediate results. Fund-raising is therefore such a desired activity. But fund-raising needs to be handled carefully as it too easily leads to superiority and sentimental feelings of charity in the donors, or gives them the idea that development can be "bought".

Many typical development education activities for children, such as writing essays, or organising an exhibit or a nutrition week, are certainly of good educational value, but do not lessen the children's thirst for the real thing. In a way they work more like appetizers as they help to raise the child's awareness. As a result of all these experiences, they may ask: "Fine, but what can we really do?"

Simulation games - situations in which real life events are simulated - are surely another extremely useful educational exercise as they give children a sense of reality and aid them to structure the mass of surrounding information. They are also powerful means to change attitudes and to bring about other ways of looking at things.

It is therefore not surprising to see that simulation games have become part and parcel of the development education tool kit. Yet simulation games by their vicarious nature will not stop the children from asking to take on real responsibilities. The obvious answer is to get children engaged in development work in their own neighborhood. Here options are plentiful: working with the elderly, the sick, the handicapped, minorities, with younger children, or for the quality of the environment. These are the fields for local action.

Some people argue that these kinds of activities, although commendable in their own right, may take away attention from problems that affect people that live outside the purview of these local activists and that they may get bogged down in self-serving initiatives. I do not share this concern. First of all, the reverse is actually happening. What we see is that those people that are involved in improving the human condition in their own communities are exactly the same people who press for global reforms. The early eighties are clearly showing this linkage. Second, most of the relevant issues of today are global in nature and almost impossible to understand in local context only. Child abuse, unemployment, urban decay, pollution, drug abuse are just a few examples of global issues with local impact everywhere. Third, I trust that development educators will continue to emphasize this global perspective. Many development educators are already pointing out that the mere fact of being in this world makes you part of the global interdependent system.

Spin-offs

If we return to our earlier remarks on information processing and the growth of pro-social behaviour, we will see that local development action will indeed contribute to resolving the predicament we sketched. Children gain in self-respect, realise that they can have a say over their own lives and environment, and become able to attach meaning to hitherto incomprehensible or unnoticed information. It is now that development education truly takes place and children may eventually turn into the kind of adults we would like to see live on earth.

I would like to end by mentioning a few spin-offs. First of all, local development work may bring back "caring" into education. It is now possible for children in many nations to graduate from university without ever having been taught to care. Second, working with local problems gives children a chance to deal with situations they can handle. Early exposure to the vast array of global questions may readily make them nervous wrecks or completely apathetic because these issues are too overwhelming.

The other spin-off relates to self-interest. What I feel is so encouraging in the debate on world development is the recognition that a more equal and just world is in the self-interest of all. The "Brandt" report is very clear about this.

At first sight one does not see a lot of self-interest in working with development at the grass roots level. Yet there is plenty of it. I personally feel that a renewed sense of self-respect, confidence, purposefulness, and recognition offers tremendous rewards for the child of this sensitive and pivotal age group.